Chapter Four

*The Winding Stair and Other Poems, Words for Music Perhaps and a Woman Young and Old*

This chapter deals with themes and symbols of the Collection of poems called *The Winding stair and Other Poems*(1933), the book, *The Collected Poems of W.B.Yeats* includes *Words for Music Perhaps*, and *A Woman Young and Old*. *Words for Music Perhaps*, which contains the Crazy Jane poems, was published in 1932 by the Cuala Press, but *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, of 1933 appears first in the *Collected Poems*‘and, as always with Yeats’s arrangement of his work, this is the logical order in which to consider the two Volumes. *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* marks the transition from a social preoccupation of *The Tower* to the intense, manic vision presented in *Words for Music Perhaps* having as its primary preoccupations *a* concern with women, particularly Lady Gregory, and with Yeatsian aesthetic, so that the tone is personal but has behind it references to society and to Yeats’s life and thought which are absent from *Words for Music Perhaps* (Cowell, 95).

The Title of *The Winding stair and Other Poems* is probably an allusion to Dante’s winding stair which leads from the ordinary, corrupt world to an ideal, celestial world. The temptation is to climb the winding stair, and leave irksome actualities behind, but Yeats characteristically resists the temptation in favour of ordinary life, even if it can sometimes seem to be merely ‘a blind man battering blind men’. For Yeats, it is clear by now; the Imagination is firmly established as a means of celebrating and vindicating human life, not of escaping from it.
The Winding stair and Other Poems begins with an elegy on Gregory sisters, called In Memory of Eva Gore –Booth and Con Mickiewicz. In this poem as pointed out by, Raymond Cowell, “he uses his poetic powers to insult these two sisters, once the beautiful daughters of Lissadell, now mere shadows”. (Cowell, 96). Their political convictions have achieved nothing permanent, but the poet says he can undo the ravages of Time. Man is at the centre of the universe ‘We the great gazebo built’ (Collected Poems, 264) and the poet proves this by recreating their former beauty, wresting it from the ‘shears’ of Time:

The light of evening, Lissadell

Great windows open to the south

Two girls in silk Kimonos, both

Beautiful, one a gazelle. (Collected Poems, 263).

This poem describes what politics or abstract causes could make of a beautiful woman. It laments the ruin of Gore- Booth sisters have fallen into because of their fanaticism. The complexity in tone and feeling is due to the poet’s ambivalence attitude towards the personae’s heroism, which he partly admires and partly harbours doubts about:

Dear shadows, now you know it all

All the folly of a flight

With a common wrong or right. (Collected Poems, 264)

There is tenderness as well as pity. The tension set up between various tones in the poem is comparable with that of Easter 1916 which can be easily explained by his close relationship with the sisters. In the first four lines, Yeats rapidly projects a series of images in a phantasmagoric procession which must be apprehended spatially rather than sequentially; they demand almost simultaneous apprehension despite
limitations imposed by topography. It is as if the speaker breathlessly conjured up those images that most powerfully recall the tranquil beauty of the Lissadell of his youth. The four lines consist of only nouns without verb or an adverb phrase of time. Economically fixed, the images give the poem a contrapuntal effect, which James Joyce has tried so hard to achieve in *Ulysses*. But though they are contrapuntal, they exist beyond the temporal scale and are timeless. Only the essentials remain; nothing is superfluous. Like Symbols, what belongs to every day accident and the ever-changing world has been transformed into a permanent pattern of order and beauty. It gives a complete picture of the two sisters in their youth: light, ‘windows’, ‘south’, ‘south kimonos’, and ‘gazelle’. The image is one of silky delicacy and warmth, suggesting oriental grace. Ravages of Time, is shown in the poem as time passes beauty is destroyed.

The theme of death or Old age is seen in this poem. Yeats’s keen awareness of old age is marked in these volumes and in this poem. Demise of the aristocracy and despair at the vanity of human grandeur is seen ‘We the great gazebo built.’(Collected Poems, 264). Yeats poetry explored ‘Nature’. Here in this poem transience in Nature’s beauty is shown as in these lines.

But a raving autumn shears

Blossom from the summer’s wreath (Collected Poems, 263).

Another theme in this poem is ‘Quest for truth which is fundamental, whether experienced through the emotional self, reason, imagination or at the expense of sanity. Truth that is philosophical, the wisdom of old age is shown in these following lines:

Dear shadows, now you know it all,

All the folly of a fight
With a common wrong or right

The Innocent and the beautiful

Have no enemy but time (Collected Poems, 264).

The poem ends on a wild, exultant note as the poet rejoices in his power to burn through time and its consequences. This is a great poem simply because within it Yeats justifies his claims for poetry by recreating a timeless beauty. What one remembers from the poem is not the unhappiness and gauntness of old sisters but the beauty and grace of their youth.

In the next poem, Death, the tone of defiance continues. This poem is written on the assassination of Kevin O’Higgins, where man confronted with death, behaves not like a ‘dying animal’ but ‘casts derision’ on death. Kevin O’Higgins was the Irish Free State’s Minister of Justice who was shot dead on his way to Mass. He had been in favour of the government’s policy in the civil war of executing anyone captured carrying arms and Yeats regarded him as the one man of strong intellect in the Free State Government. The poet contrasts death of an animal with that of man, and one man of superior worth, in particular. The theme of Death is again discussed by Yeats. He is discussing Irish leader and his death shows his interest in Politics.

In the poem A Dialogue of Self and Soul, Yeats tips the balance in favor of life in this world. While Soul argues for the deliverance from ‘the crime of death and birth’, Self that has the last word in the debate, wants ‘to commit the crime once more’(Collected Poems,266) and says that there is no point in escaping from all this rich experience of life:

A living man is blind and drinks his drop.

What matter if the ditches are impure?

What matter if I live it all once more?
Endure the toil of growing up; . . .

I am content to live it all again
And yet again, if it be life to pitch
Into the frog –spawn of a blind man’s ditch,
A blind man battering blind man; . . .
I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought; . . . (Collected poems, 266).

Self undoubtedly prefers earthly life, even if that life is cast into a blind man’s ditch, to the heavenly glory which the soul advocates. The self is looking forward to its escape from the cycle of reincarnations into nirvana or the Thirteenth sphere, but on the contrary, comes to the triumphant recognition of the tragic joy, the bitter sweetness that is involved in the acceptance of life. Thus, logically, the poem ends on a fairly happy note:

We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest. (Collected Poems, 267).

The moment of insight or sense of beatitude does not exclusively belong to the saint. “In a letter to Mrs. Shakespeare on he says that he gives in poem Vacillation the poetic utterance to the same kind of experience” (Letters to Olivia Shakespeare, 785-786 from The Letters of W.B.Yeats, ed. by Allen Wade) which reminds us of the lines quoted above:

And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless. (Collected Poems, 284).
The same theme of life and after life is picked up in *Vacillation* in which the same characters Soul and Self under the name Soul and The Heart appear. The poem opens by posing a profound question: ‘What is joy’ (Collected Poems, 282). This question is asked in the larger context of the scheme of human life which is full of antinomies. Death, at its best, can only destroy these antinomies; it cannot reconcile them. In the second section the poet attempts to answer the elusive question posed in the first. The symbolic tree, ‘half all glittering flame and half all green’, represents body and soul. The poet identifies himself with the priest in the Attis ritual according to which the priest hangs the image of a God on the scared tree. This act is symbolic of one’s willing surrender of experience for the sake of honoring one’s God, because it is said that devotees of Attis castrated themselves at the festival. By making this sacrifice, one does not attain supreme knowledge, but experiences an ecstasy which one ‘knows not grief’; yet the poet is not certain if this could be called joy. After all, how is it possible for a realist to enjoy unalloyed happiness in the face of the reality of all consuming transience? Even that symbolic tree with its ‘branches of the night and day /Where the gaudy moon is hung’ (Collected Poems, 285) is born out of the ‘blood–sodden heart’ of the mortal man. There is nothing enduring in life; even art like its creator dies its death. Hence the cry ‘Let all things pass away’.

Taking its cue from this idea of evanescence, the Soul enters into debate with the Heart which constitutes the thematic center of the poem. Since all things pass away, the Soul urges the Heart to abandon things that seem and seek out reality which endures:

The Soul. Seek out reality, leave things that seem.

The Heart. What, be a singer born and lack a theme?

The Soul. Isaiah’s coal, what more can man desire?
The Heart. Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire!

The Soul. Look on that fire, salvation walks within.

The Heart. What theme had Homer but original sin? (Collected Poems, 285).

The Soul argues that artists should try to escape from the ephemeral aspects of life and aspire to the reality or eternity of the Christian heaven. In other words, the Soul exhorts the Heart to accept Christianity and find salvation there. But the Heart refuses to adopt the Soul’s advice, because the former realizes that a religious man’s blissful heaven is the graveyard of an artist. In the Christian heaven a poet would be ‘struck dumb’. Poetry flourishes only in the ‘Complexities of Mire and Blood’ and not in a heaven where there are no conflicts, anti nomies, or passions but only resolution, peace and happiness. Poets from Homer down to Yeats have been concerned with the tantalizing imperfections of human life, the innate defect or ‘the weasel’s twist’ in man, or what the Soul would call ‘original sin’. Poets are committed to the sinful fire of passion rather than to the purifying fire of heaven.

Consequently, in the last section, the poet bids farewell to Von Hugel who in his *The Mystical Element of Religion*, argues that the Christian vision is identical to the artist’s. Yeats admits that his ‘heart might find relief’ in Christian promises is a welcome thing in the tomb. Also, he is one with Von Hugel in accepting ‘the miracles of the saints’ and honoring sanctity. In a letter to Mrs. Shakespeare referring to an earlier version of the last section of this poem, Yeats says “Yet I accept all miracles… why should I doubt the tale that when St. Theresa’s tomb was opened in the middle of the nineteenth century the still undecayed body dripped with fragment oil?” (Letters, 789-790). However, the poet prefers the restless complexities of the here- and now to the salvation and heaven which lies beyond the grave. In the letter quoted above,
Yeats declares that the saint’s choice is not his. He rejects the ‘Comedy’ involved in the life of the saint, who enjoys eternal bliss after death, and accepts the ‘tragedy’ involved in the life of an artist, whose only happy hunting ground is the sinful life of this world, what he calls his ‘predestined part’. Despite the tempting prospect of being released from the Vacillation of his sinful life by the Christian faith, the poet chooses the pagan or Homeric ideal.

I – though heart might find relief
Did I become a Christian man and choose for my belief
What seems most welcome in the tomb play a predestined part.
Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.
The lion and the honeycomb, what has scripture said?
So get you gone, Von Hugel, though with blessings on your head.

The Lion, in Christianity, is a symbol of the Lord, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and the honey comb represents the Promised Land. Here Yeats makes them symbol of the strength of a poet from whose mouth flows the honey of poetry. Despite all his respect for Von Hugel, Yeats finally rejects what scripture has prescribed and celebrates the unchristened living rather than the temptations of heaven.

It is interesting to note that Vacillation is a more poetic and elaborate discussion of what Yeats has said in The Choice: “The intellect of man is forced to choose . . . A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark”(Collected Poem,278). In Vacillation the poet explains why he has chosen the life of an artist, abandoning the heavenly mansion which comes with the choice of the perfection of life which belongs to the saint. As Unterecker, observes, this poem is partially autobiographical.” (Unterecker, 221). The progress of the poem is from Yeats’s
youth the early tree image, through early manhood and middle age ‘fortieth winter’ and ‘My fiftieth Year’ (Collected Poem, 283), and finally to his last years of mature wisdom when he makes his final choice. Before he makes that choice, he considers both the possibilities: religion or art. In fact, section seventh of the poem, there is an inner debate an interior dialogue in which he answers to his own doubts. In the last section, dropping the masks of Soul and Heart, the poet speaks in his own voice declaring the dedication of his life to poetry while realizing the risk of losing an eternal heaven involved in that choice.

Next poem is *Blood and the Moon* as discussed in previous chapter *The Tower*. The Tower is symbolic against the background of Time, of faded beauty and youth. As, Chatterjee, points out

> The Tower symbol, however, takes on many other associations from other poems and represents the poet’s torturous processes of thought. The ‘winding, gyring, spiring’ stair suggests that it requires effort and toil to clamber on and reinforces the image of ‘mysterious wisdom won by toil; the spiral imagery also, signifies that the tower is a part of the revolving historical cycle. ‘ The reference to the famous figures in Irish history, Swift, Grattan, Burke and others makes the tower a symbol of tradition, of national heritage’: Irish history becomes related to Time’s unending march. Elsewhere it becomes a symbol of violence, and of blood thirstiness: (Chatterjee, 111)

> A bloody, arrogant power

> Rose out of the race

> Uttering, mastering it,
Rose like these walls from these
Storm –beaten cottages (Collected poems, 267).

Like The Tower, Blood and the Moon is also, a poem about the need to stand firm, to triumph over meaningless violence and the tides of change and destruction. It is the most direct statement on the poet’s alignment with eighteenth century Ireland.

The Tower is turned into a symbol that unifies the present with the past:

I declare this tower is my symbol; I declare
This winding, gyring, spiring treadmill of a stair is my ancestral stair;
That Goldsmith and the dean, Berkeley and Burke have travelled there.

(Collected Poems, 268).

To Yeats, Burke, Swift, and Grattan are symbols of a glorious Ireland, whose people have “created the most of the modern literature of the country and the best of its political intelligence”. (Jeffares, 265). To him, they each represented some quality that he admired:

As, mentioned in Essays and Introductions,

Born in such a community, Berkeley with his belief in perception, that abstract ideas are mere words, Swift with his love of perfect nature, of the Houyhnhnms, his disbelief in Newton’s system and every sort of machine, Goldsmith and his delight in the particulars of common life that shocked his contemporaries, Burke with his conviction that all states not green slowly like a forest tree are tyrannies, found in England the opposite that stung their thought into expression and made it lucid. (Essays and Introductions, 402).
Yeats expresses a similar distaste for the cold aloofness symbolized by the moon, and re-affirms an allegiance to life:

For wisdom is the property of the dead,
A something incompatible with life; and power,
Like everything that has the stain of blood,
A property of the living. (Collected Poems, 269).

As pointed out by Cowell, the poet must assert creative power of the human Imagination, not capitulate to pessimism or despair, Yeats constantly implies, and in the magnificently sardonic *Three Movements* he writes his own version of literary history, seeing an ever-increasing failure of nerve and imaginative strength:

Shakespearean fish swam the sea, far away from land;
Romantic fish swam in nets coming to the hand;

What are all those fish that lie gasping on the strand? (Collected Poems, 271).

A similar point is made symbolically in *The Crazed Moon*. “He sees contemporary poetry as being an escapist, concerned only with sources of inspiration long since exhausted, and therefore dying of inanition.”(Cowell, 98-99). The gist of this is expressed in the supremely daring and original image:

Crazed though much child–bearing
The moon is staggering in the sky. (Collected Poems, 273).

The traditional symbol of purity has never been more effectively stood on its head. The third stanza of the poem is reminiscent of *The Stare’s Nest by my Window*, where Yeats said that his generation’s heart grew brutal from the exclusive fare of fantasy:

Fly catchers of the moon,
Our hands are blenched, our fingers seem
But slender needles of bone;
Blenced by that malicious dream
They are spread wide that each

_Coole Park, 1929_ is a poem which is partly engendered by an Irish disturbance of the Civil War. This is a Political poem, on war. Here the poet tries to create ‘emblems of adversity’ out of Coole and asserts his values in the midst of destructive forces:

I meditate upon a swallow’s flight,
Upon an aged woman and her house,
A sycamore and lime-tree lost in night
Although that western cloud is luminous,
Great works constructed there in nature’s spite
For scholars and for Poets after us (Collected Poem, 274).

By now Yeats is absolute master of his craft. The setting, so effortlessly arranged, is comparable with the opening of the Lissadell poem: The first line with the image of the swallow anchors the theme, preparing us for the third stanza, in which people ‘came like swallows and like swallows went’. The landscape described is not merely scene—painting. Put in the context of ‘night’ and ‘nature’s spite’, ‘sycamore’, ‘lime—tree’ and ‘great works’ all evoke symbolic associations.

What Coole has so far meant to Yeats once again finds expression in poetry. All the values the Big House stand for are further emphasized in the third stanza, in which place, people and bird become inter-related symbols, with Lady Gregory as the axis upon which the symbols wheel:
They came like swallows and like swallows went,
And yet a woman’s powerful character
Could keep a swallow to its first intent;
And half a dozen in formation there,
That seemed to whirl upon a compass point,
Found certainty upon the dreaming air,
The intellectual sweetness of those lines
That cut through time or cross it withers shins. (Collected Poems, 274).

The beautiful cadence of the lines and the graceful movement of the chiasmus in ‘They came like swallows and like swallows went’ collaborate with the beautiful image and liquid sound pattern. The long Vowels in ‘keep’, ‘dreaming’, ‘sweetness’, ‘there’ and ‘air’ would scarcely escape notice to conjure up a perfect pattern of order and harmony. The centrifugal movement of the swallows round compass-point functions as a symbol of coherence, giving Yeats, John Synge, Shaw Taylor and Lane the proper orientation, investing their lives and activity with meaning.

Finally, the poem closes by exalting Lady Gregory, who through Yeats’ mythologizing attains increased stature. Transformed into an immortal and accorded the role as such, she will outlive the house in times of change. The mood of the poem reflects the fact that Lady Gregory had been obliged to sell Coole Park to the forestry Department two years previously though allowed to occupy it for the rest of her life. In the poem Lady Gregory emerges as the embodiment of traditional social and spiritual values, which had provided stability for so long. Although the house itself cannot defy time, the values it represents can, and the ‘dance –like glory that those walls begot’ remains as a rallying point.
The realistic optimism and hope of these lines is very touching, but it is modified in the next poem on Coole Park. *Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931* where the cruel erosion of time is seen as a challenge to poets, which they are not facing up to:

Where fashion or mere fantasy decrees
We shift about- all that great glory spent-
Like some poor Arab tribesman and his tent. (Collected poem, 276).

All is changed now and the traditional Romantic themes, ‘Sanctity and loveliness’, are too fragile to survive in a ‘darkening’ age. The poet must be masterful, a horseman, controlling time rather than being swept along by it. In these two poems, then, Yeats accepts the passing of Coole Park has gone he is more fully aware of the responsibilities of his imagination to recreate positive values for a new age.

Up to this point in this Volume, three possibilities have been rehearsed: Time can be defeated by the power of poetic imagination; Time can be controlled by the force of tradition or personality, as exemplified by Lady Gregory; or Time can uproot man. This last possibility is explored in *Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931* but it is soon dismissed as a defeatist thought. But of course, Yeats is aware of the dangers implicit in this concept of a powerful, controlling imagination. (Cowell, 99-100).

This poem is an attempt to erect an emblem in adversity; it has its genesis in contemporary unrest. Like, *Coole Park, 1929*, it also gives symbolic significance to the topography and incorporates it into his theme—the loss of ‘traditional sanctity and loveliness’ (Collected Poems, 276) lamenting the decline of the Big House, which
stands for order and ancient ceremony. The poem opens with a precise description of Ballylee and Coole, with the relationship between them closely linked to Yeats’s friendship with Lady Gregory. Like most descriptions of Irish landscape in his mature poetry, Coole is fused with symbols. To Yeats, the movement of water is the movement of the soul out of light (life) into darkness (death) and again into light, which anticipates the last line of the poem, where the swan drifts upon the darkening flood. Swans on dark waters symbolize for Yeats the artist who, dying, sings in fading light. The journey of the soul through light, darkness and light is suggested by the sweep of the sentence.

Yeats’s treatment of Coole in this poem differs from that in The Wild Swans at Coole. In the earlier poem, the setting has no tragic association and there is the clear serene autumn twilight. In Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931, we have ‘dry sticks under a wintry sun’ (Collected Poems, 275) and ‘Nature’s pulled her tragic buskin on’. The tragic mood, already present in Coole Park, 1929 is reflected by the macrocosm outside.

Yeats’ poetical method is illustrated also, in Veronica’s Napkin which unfortunately has not received adequate attention from critics. There are two basic symbols in the poem: Veronica’s Napkin which is germinal image and ‘Berenice’s hair’. As Jesus Christ was bearing the cross to Golgotha, Veronica offered him her handkerchief to wipe his brow; the image of His face became impressed upon it. Berenice was the wife of Ptolemy iii. During her husband’s absence she dedicated her hair to Venus for his safe return and placed it in a temple. Her hair disappeared from the temple by some unknown means: Canon of Samos, the mathematician and astronomer, explained that it was carried to the heavens and was transformed into a constellation. Both the symbols thus become linked with each other and suggest the
idea of Transformation. The napkin was just a commonplace thing; but when the image of Christ was stamped on it, it became profoundly meaningful. Similarly, Berenice’s Hair had nothing more than sheer physical beauty placed among stars; it transcended itself and acquired a resplendent glory. Veronica was a pious, devoted saint, and Berenice proved herself a chaste, faithful wife. This idea of transformation through devotion is built up through a series of images arrayed against one another. The unfolding of the theme may be observed more closely. ‘Heavenly Circuit’ may be taken simply as the sky, as the poet looks at the sky, he gazes immediately at the stars, and the image of ‘Berenice’s hair’ comes to his mind; the image of pole suggest something self contained and constricts of the idea of Heaven ,while the line

Symbolical glory of the earth and air! (Collected poem, 270).

Suggests an illimitable canvas.

This image of the heavenly canopy has a close resemblance with the Byzantine dome. The image of ‘the circuit of the needle’s eye may have been taken, transferred from the context, from the Christ’s well known saying: ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than a rich man to enter into Kingdom of God. “The ‘circuit of a needle’s eye’ is contrasted with the ‘Heavenly circuit’ so far as physical dimension is concerned, but spiritually it symbolizes the gateway to heaven. The ‘Pole’ of the second passage is tethered to the earth; to unbelievers the pattern on a napkin dipped in blood is without meaning, but to Veronica and Christ’s disciples the pattern is an image of Christ himself ,and is of profound spiritual import”. (Chatterjee, 115-116).
This idea of transformation is also the basic theme of *Byzantium*.

In *Byzantium* the poet presents a picture in which the two worlds—human and superhuman—are symbolically set face to face evoking unanswerable questions of philosophy and religion. The poem begins with the ‘the unpurged images of day’ (*Collected Poem*, 280). At the dead of night the ‘Great cathedral gong’ sends the nocturnal wanderers singing out of sight. ‘Drunken soldiery’ and ‘night-walkers’ are images or ordinary objects of experience which constitute the external world, and the ‘Cathedral gong’ symbolizes the force and power of the spiritual world. Similarly, the ‘starlit or moonlit dome’ is set against the fury and mire of man’s existence in the world of nature. The dome being round is the traditional symbol of perfection. By associating it with moon and star, the poet makes a clear reference to Phases Fifteen and One on the Great Wheel of his system, and these Phases represent complete spirituality. Also, this image is full of literary echoes: a reversal of Shelley’s famous ‘dome of many coloured glass’. It reminds of Blake’s *Cosmic egg*, of Coleridge’s dome in *Kubla khan* and also, dome of Santa Sophia which is a symbol of heaven and eternity.

In the second stanza Yeats describes ‘Hades Bobbin’ which is the human soul, ‘Shade more than man, more image than a shade’ which sounds somewhat like Eliot’s *Hollowman*, ‘shape without form, shade without colour’ (*Collected Poem*, 280). The image or shade in the second stanza becomes Hades bobbin which in life is bound in the mummy-cloth of experience and which, unwinding the cloth on its return to Hades, suggests interlocking gyres of the Yeatsian symbolic system. This idea that the soul comes from Hades and goes back to the same place after unwinding life’s experience cannot be claimed as a Christian concept concerning the entrance and exit of human souls, even though the entire idea is couched in Christian imagery. The
‘winding’ path is not only experiences of this mundane world, but probably also the cycle of births and deaths or reincarnations, an idea the poet is so fond of. In the poem *Mohini Chatterjee* which immediately precedes *Byzantium* in the *Collected Poems*, Yeats talks about the cycle of rebirths:

Birth is heaped on birth
That such cannonade
May thunder time away,
Birth-hour and death-hour meet,
Or, as great sages say,
Men dance on deathless feet (Collected poems, 280).

It is perhaps this thundering time away after the cycle of reincarnation in order to have the birth-hour and death-hour meet that is referred to in the images of ‘Hades bobbin’, ‘Mummy cloth’ and ‘death-in-life’.

From this succinctly symbolic description of the soul’s journey, the poet goes on to another image of the superhuman—‘Miracle, bird or golden handiwork’ (Collected Poem, 280)—an image located in the world of art. The golden bird is a miracle accomplished by art; it is ‘the artifice of eternity’ which is far superior to common birds. As Ellmann points out, since “Yeats accepts reincarnation in this poem, he is distinguishing between the ‘birds that sing the common strain of the continuing cycle of human lives and those that scorn the cycle and sing only of escape from it; here were the two directions of his own art.” (Ellmann, 220-221). The bird that scorns aloud ‘all complexities of mire and blood’ is the ideal bird which stands outside the flux of time and sings of escape into eternity from the tyranny of time and space. In the earlier poem, Ellmann says that “the sensual life is separated from the spiritual as Ireland from *Byzantium*, but in the later poem the fury and the
mire of human veins, the teeming images, ‘that dolphin- torn, that gong tormented sea’, flood up to the marbles of Byzantium itself, where they are at last brought under control by ‘the golden smithies of the Emperor”. (Ellmann, Man and the Mask, 273).

Gradually the master image of Byzantium must have assumed dominance of the scene. The completed poem has often been taken as a representation of the after-life, and Yeats wished this interpretation to be possible; but to him Byzantium was primarily a description of the act of making a poem. The poet, who is imprecisely identified with the Byzantine emperor takes a welter of images and masters them in an act of creation. This mastery is so astonishing to the poet himself that he calls the creation of his imagination superhuman. “The image of the Golden bird, ‘more miracle than bird or handiwork’(Collected Poems,280) may be understood to represent a poem, the bird sings, as do Yeats’s poems, either like the cocks of Hades of rebirth – the continuing cycle of reincarnating human life, or with greater glory of the eternal reality or beatitude which transcends the cycles ‘and all complexities of mire or blood’.”(The Man and the Mask, 273-274).

In the fourth stanza, Yeats describes the purgatorial process by which the ‘unpurged images of day’ are refined into purged images of night. ‘Neither Fire ’is the central image in this section’ Flames that no faggot feeds nor steel has lit, / Nor storms disturbs, flames begotten of flame’ (Collected poems, 281).and ‘Agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.’ Ellmann readily agrees “with this fire-imagination parallelism or identification when he says that the passage of the spirits of the dead to the other world and their purification is ‘synonymous with the purgative process which a work of art undergoes.”(Identity, 221-222). These processes are among those which Yeats makes equivalent and symbolical of one another. It is possible that the poet implies a similarity between the perfection of after-life and the perfected work of
art. These two symbolically merge in the image of the ‘dance’ which is again a
symbol. Yeats uses dance as a symbol in the previous Volume also in the poem
Among School Children.

The last stanza is controlled by the twin images of ‘dolphin’ and ‘gong’. They
bring flesh and spirit face to face in a problematic way. The dolphin, in occult lore, is
a traditional symbol of the material vehicle of the soul for journeying across the sea of
life and death towards the Almighty. The spirits of the dead, in the poem, come
‘Astraddle on the dolphins mire and blood’ (Collected Poems, 281). The dolphin, in
Elizabethan literature, symbolizes that which lives both in and out of its element.
Here, by mentioning the ‘mire and blood’ the poet associates the dolphin with the
sensual aspect of life. The ‘gong’ on the other hand, symbolizes the world of spirit or
eternity, and it comes from the ‘cathedral gong’ of stanza first. The waters of life are
torn asunder by the mire and blood of dolphins that carry spirit after spirit across the
sea, while at the same time the sea of life is tormented by the gong of eternity. In the
other words, life is tormented by the gong of eternity. In other words, life is an intense
conflict; it is a tension between spirit and blood. The here and now of human life is
eternally haunted by supernatural presences. The golden smithies of the Byzantine
Emperor break the flood of life, drive away the furies of complexity and the dross of
mire and blood, and break the cycle of reincarnation. Yet the reality is, the poet seems
to say that man remains suspended between flesh and spirit and that life forever is
‘That dolphin torn, that gong – tormented sea’ (Collected Poem, 281) which has the last
word. It is significant to note that the poem does not end with the serene and tranquil
acceptance of the supernatural, as it should after breaking all the bitter furies of
complexity by the marbles of the dancing floor.
While it is true that one is not sure of a final explication, *Byzantium* undoubtedly is about the poet’s insistence on the reality of the supernatural. However, it would be a mistake to claim that it is a philosophical treatment of the theme of life after death. It is true that the poet makes use of the ideas of purgation and immortality and of traditional images like dolphin, cathedral gong, fire, water, bird; but these ideas and images are used in a poetic context to yield symbolic meaning for events in creative experience. All these purgatorial images are reminiscent of Dante’s work, and it seems that Yeats in his ambitious moments wanted to be like Dante. But he was painfully aware of the fact that it was an impossible dream to be realized in this science- oriented, fact accumulating world. It is not difficult to see how the traditional symbols undergo a change in meaning as they are used in the poem. To point out one example, water is used to represent life. The image of the Golden smithies breaking the flood does not carry any of the regenerative and spiritual meaning that water is associated with in religion. Yeats makes it ocean of tension and conflict, of spirit and blood, the element of disturbance.

Now, Symbols and themes of *Words for Music Perhaps*, Yeats draws on the peasantry, which is consistent with his early poetics. Much has been written about the source of the Crazy Jane group of poems. Of concern here are the concepts and experiences embodied in the poems through their dramatic characters and arresting imagery. It is easy to see that the poet’s often asserted idea of natural impulse against the repressive code of rational morality lies at the root of these poems. It has already been noticed that, as pointed out by Cowell, from about 1917 onwards, women were very important in Yeats’s poetry because of their comparative freedom from intellectual entanglements, and such a figure as Sheba from his earlier poetry anticipates Crazy Jane. It is characteristic of his later period, however, that Yeats
should take his heroine not from Bible but from his own observation. The importance of Crazy Jane is that she is intensely alive; she knows what she is talking about from an experience of life which has given her wisdom without bitterness. The Crazy Jane poems were started in the spring of 1929 after a period of personal depression. His description in a letter of the source of this new inspiration suggests his delight and gratitude:

Crazy Jane is more or less founded on an old woman who lives in a cottage near Gort. She loves her flower garden. She has just sent Lady Gregory some flowers in spite of the season and has amazing powers of acidulous speech-one of her queer performances is a description of how the meanness of a Gort shopkeeper’s wife over the price of a glass of porter made her so despairing of the human race she got drunk. The incidents of the drunkenness are of an epic magnificence. She is the local satirist and a really terrible one. (Letters, 785-786).

In *Words for Music Perhaps* Yeats is making full use of the speech and life of the peasantry, which, in Supernatural Songs have become for him symbols in the experience of good and evil. The subject of these poems is the need for a complete union of Soul and Body. To deny the body its role, they imply, is to deny man life. Because of Yeats’s comprehensive vision of life, sex is treated with unprecedented realism. More or less founded upon on an old woman who lives in a little cottage near Gort’, Crazy Jane stands folk experience, which apprehends life whole. She is a violent, earthy character:

Jack had my virginity,

And bids me to the oak, for he
(All find safety in the tomb.)
Wanders out into the night
And there is shelter under it,
But should that other come, I spit:
The solid man and the coxcomb. (Collected Poems, 290-291).

That other man is, of course, the bishop. Upholding life-withering morals, he contrasts with Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman and Tom the Lunatic:

The bishop has a skin, God knows,
Wrinkled like the foot of a goose . . .
The heron’s hunch upon his back,
But a birch- tree stood my Jack:
The solid man and the coxcomb. (Collected poems, 290).

While Jane gladly offers her virginity to Jack under the shelter of the oak tree, she spits at the Bishop who reproves her for her sensuality. The explicitly phallic symbols of birch tree and oak tree as appropriate to Crazy Jane in the first poem as the sea-shell which symbolizes the miracle of divine creation to the bishop in the next. The ‘birch tree’ symbolizes masculinity and life. Working by means of sets of oppositions or dialectical Contraries, which foreshadow the Chambermaid and the lady, these poems present different views of life with the poet on Crazy Jane’s side. The Bishop, in Yeats’ opinion, has ruled out life by denying himself sex. Soul and body is complementary; neither can be complete without the other. By coming to grips with the stark facts of life, Crazy Jane lives it whole. The point is clinched by the pun in the last two Para- doxical lines sole- soul, whole- hole. In an equally outspoken manner, Three Things reiterates this belief:
Three dear Things that woman know,
Sang a bone upon the shore;
A child found all a child can lack,
Whether of pleasure or of rest,
Upon the abundance of my breast’:
A bone wave whitened and dried in the wind. (Collected Poems, 300).

The sexual overtone in the last but one line bespeaks Yeats’s increased preoccupation with sex in old age, for he believed that “only two topics can be of the least interest to a serious and studious mind—sex and the dead”. (Letters, 730).

After reading these poems one can easily judge that they also carry allegorical meaning. Though Crazy Jane is an interesting, terrible character in her own right, she is primarily an Irish symbol; the aged Cathleen Ni Houlihan. The Bishop represents prudence, common sense, social morality and the power of the law against the individual. His primal meaning is as the representative of the Puritan-Catholic conscience in Ireland. As the opposite of the Bishop, Crazy Jane stands for a good deal that Yeats’s held dear about Irish life. His belief in passion, imagination and ecstatic religious feeling are here, as is also his interest in the sordid experiences of life which had access to a higher innocence.

The tension between Crazy Jane and the Bishop can be viewed also as that between the artist and the moralist, the imaginative and the prudential. The intensity of life’s experience, especially those called morally evil by the Bishop’s standards, leads to an Art and a vision of life. This view upon life can, to some extent, be attributed to the Civil War, which sharpened his apprehension of the world. He could now penetrate deep into things and experience, extracting from their essence, which he bodied forth in symbols.
It seems that in *Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment* she speaks for Yeats when she says:

Love is all

Unsatisfied

That cannot take the whole


This idea is later developed in several ways. Answering the Bishop’s admonition to ‘Live in a heavenly mansion’ not in ‘in some foul sty’ Crazy Jane says: ‘Fair and foul are near of kin / And fair needs foul’.(Collected Poems,294). The concept of the wholeness of experience, of the union of opposites, of spirit and body, and God and sex is the basic philosophy projected in these poems. Jane is the embodiment of the union of opposites. She loves Jack and lets other men use her body while she sings, ‘All things remain in God’ She learns eternal truths in ‘bodily lowliness/ And in the heart’s pride’. (Collected Poems,294). Fair and foul, spiritual nobility and sexual depravity, love and excrement lie cheek by jowl:

But Love has pitched his mansion in

The place of excrement;

For nothing can be sole or whole

That has not been rent. (Collected Poems, 295).

This is no romantic conception of love by an idealist. It is down to earth realism which strikes the climatic note in the anatomical image in the last line. The Bishop who condemns natural life as evil and asserts the dichotomy of soul and body has failed to see truth in its entirety. Soul and body are two halves of a single entity. A recognition of the sacredness of earth is a prerequisite for the admittance to spiritual
bliss. Sanctity is not a one-way traffic; it applies to both the worlds, natural and supernatural.

The three poems dealing with Old Tom the Lunatic, a masculine counterpart of Jane, are primarily concerned with time and eternity, fantasy and reality. Though physically blinded; Tom has the inner vision to see through the superficial flesh into eternal reality that lies behind everything. He makes fun of people who sing ‘penance on the road’ in a perfunctory way and derides those who exist ‘Wrenching, drinking’ which presents a funeral image. However, nothing dies permanently:

Whatever stands in field and flood,
Bird, beast, fish or man,
Mare or stallion, cock or hen,
Stands in God’s unchanging eye,
In all the vigour of its blood;
In that faith I live or die. (Collected Poems, 305).

In Tom at Cruachan Yeats metaphorically speaks about the relation between Time and Eternity which explains man’s double nature, for he is the result of mating of the two:

The stallion Eternity
Mounted the mare of Time,
Gat the foal of the world. (Collected Poems, 306).

The Animal Imagery, highly evocative of sexuality, is now transformed into an immense metaphor for the conception both of Christ and of the world: man is both perishable and imperishable, a creature compounded from Time and from Eternity, a dying in destructible thing. Man, in other words, is poised between Eternity and Time, and his humanity depends upon his maintaining contact with both. Man denies his
humanity when he tires of the tension between these two impulses within him. As if anticipating a charge of glorifying ignorance by locating his ideal of humanity in two characters such as *Crazy Jane* and *Tom the Lunatic*, Yeats ends the Volume with a poem in praise of a philosopher, Plotinus, whom he sees as having resisted the temptation to escape from life into the bland detachment of philosophy:

    Behold that great Plotinus swim,
    Buffeted by such seas;
    Bland Rhadamanthus beckons him,
    But the Golden Race looks dim,
    Salt blood blocks his eyes. (Collected Poems, 306).

‗Salt blood‘ suggests very strikingly how Plotinus is immersed in human problems, so that his is a human rather than transcendental philosophy. Philosophy need not be ethereal, any more than the life of the emotions need be bestial. Plotinus on the one hand, and *Crazy Jane* and *Tom the Lunatic* on the other, achieves this balance between Time and Eternity and Soul.

In *A Woman Young and Old*, the sexual theme becomes explicit again, as a symbol of the fusion of body and spirit. Through the sexual act men and women can defeat time without forsaking their humanity. As *Chosen* says, in that moment of ‘stillness . . . where his heart my heart did seem’, the tyranny of sequential time is defeated: ‘The Zodiac is changed into a sphere.’(Collected Poem,311). As pointed out by Cowell,

Perhaps the greatest difficulty a writer encounters in dealing with a sexual theme is to avoid becoming pompous or didactic. The poem *Consolation* shows how easily Yeats avoids these dangers. Once again as in *A Dialogue of Self and Soul*, the
attitude rejected is the one that thinks of birth as a crime, though Yeats admits that this pessimism has certain intellectual attractions. (Cowell, 110-111)

O but there is wisdom/ In what the sages said’ (Collected Poem,310). However, talking to a beloved woman, he asks her to excuse him while he thanks the sages for providing him with the pessimism whose rejection intensifies his sexual joys:

How could passion run so deep

Had I never thought

That the crime of being born

Blackens all our lot?

But where the crime’s committed

The crime can be forgot. (Collected Poems, 310).

The supreme confidence of the last two lines reflects the depth of Yeats’s convictions, avoiding, through the trace of wit, any suggestion of moral self-righteousness. The positive, defiant disregard of old age shown in the Crazy Jane poems is also reflected in poems in this Volume which are more specifically about old age. ‘Bodily decrepitude’ is seen not as a final sign of emotional exhaustion, but rather as a cloak that can if allowed to, hide a man’s permanent and unfading emotions even from himself. The emotional and human tragedy that can result from this situation is beautifully expressed in Meeting, where an old man and woman, lovers in their youth, greet each other with defensive scorn on meeting, repudiating the emotions of their youth:

Hidden by old age awhile

In masker’s cloak and hood,
Each hating what the other loved,

Face to face we stood. (Collected Poems, 314).

They both hate their own bodies, but still, though neither will admit it, love the body and spirit of the other loved ‘each hating what the other loved’ (Collected Poems, 314). This line in its intense compression is typical of this poem’s tragic insight. They pour scorn on each other in their pride and rage, but the woman sees the situation as it is:

But such as he for such as me-

Could we both discard

This beggarly habiliment-

Had found a sweeter word. (Collected Poems, 315).

This then for Yeats is the greatest temptation of old age, to be deceived by bodily decrepitude into illogical and tragic conclusion that one is old emotionally. It is a deception that Yeats never ceased to rage against.
Works Cited


